New Fiction

Continued From Preceding Page.

England, where she had been sent at the age of 13, comes back home to the African farm her father had built up out of the concession of bare veld and bush that he had obtained when he was a mere youngster. Now it was a beautiful place, thriving and rich lands surrounding the charming house in its circle of gardens and tennis court with the great barns and outhouses lying near, cattle grazing in vast herds, and at the foot of the cliffs the ocean thundering on a beautiful shore. Cecil loves it, and rejoices to be back again in the fair and free life she has never forgotten. Her younger sister, now sixteen, is eager to hear all about England and the marvels of life there, but Cecil cannot answer one-half of the younger girl's questions. She has been secluded in the most reserved of schools, surrounded by a hundred rules and inhibitions, allowed to see only a bit of London, educational London, kept away from the natural emotional development of her years. Gwen seems to her in many ways older than herself—Gwen frightens Cecil a bit, with her strange questions and her frank avowals.

Cecil marries before she has been home six months, marries a good, attractive man with whom she has nothing in common but the urge of sex and the longing to be mated. Hugh is well bred, simple and deeply in love. Cecil, unstirred but curious and somewhat wrought upon by the African fervor of climate and by the romantic situation, is easily fooled into thinking herself as deeply in love.

The coming of the man who really does awaken her, and for whom she soon feels that the world will be well lost, and her son and her husband with it, and of what comes after, and of how fate has its way with the whole of them, is the story. Mr. Keable poses the ever vexing problem, is life for the sake of the individual or the race, and answers it according to his convictions. It is frankly put, and frankly met. It seems under the conditions given, to be fairly answered.

But the enchanting atmosphere of the book cannot be conveyed by any such outline as the above. It has a singular freshness, it is like a door opening on a fair morning with a splendid prospect meeting the gaze. The delight in nature and what it gives is most winning. The walk of the two sisters the first morning of the reunion, their swim in the ocean, where, naked as two nymphs, they revel in the salt splendor of the water and the keen rays of the sun, the joy of an early ride, sleep under the stars among mountains, these things are written about as only one who loves such fine and simple pleasures could write of them. The look and the fragrance of flowers, the great shapes of the cliffs and peaks, the long day on the trek, the camp at night, these things are presented with just the telling detail that makes them real. Story and scene are closely woven, the native life enters it as it would enter, fitting in with the whole, giving its richness to the pattern.

Mr. Keable has managed, in Pamela Urfurd, to draw an interesting and unusual girl. She is the product of a life hardly to me met out of Africa, but both she and her father are individuals who would stand out anywhere. He has trained the girl to meet life on her own feet, to be mistress of herself without the aid of conventions or the thousand props of civilization. Yet both he and she are highly bred, cultured, fine, members of an old race that has not lost its vigor. Pamela plays a great part in the story and walks a difficult road, and it is she who most interests the reader. She dabbles in the mysteries, too. She can hypnotize, and works strange spells on the natives. The long trek she and Chris take together in Basutoland is precisely the sort of experience that belongs to her, and there is not an incident in it that the reader will want to miss. There will probably be conflicting opinions as to the propriety of her conduct, but Mr. Keable is not worrying over such matters. He is amazingly honest in making his people talk and act in the way they would, and he is not given to asterisks. There is plain speaking in this book, as there was in his preceding story. Those who object to spades and the calling of them spades, had better choose some other book. But those who care for a rich and interesting story, who feel the thrill of adventure and the call of wild places and who delight in meeting real men and women, even though they may differ from many of the opinions expressed by them, are going to find a great delight in this African novel, and to hope for more of the same kind from the man who wrote it—set, at least, in the magic of the huge continent, part of which Mr. Keable knows so well.

HILDEGARDE HAWTHORNE.

MARY LEE—By Geoffrey Dennis. Alfred A. Knopf.

THIS is an uncannily powerful book, one that will make a deep and lasting impression upon the comparatively small class of readers to whom it is addressed. It is quite out of the vogue of the day, both in the manner of it and in the conception of the theme as a whole. It belongs rather to the great Victorian tradition in its technique, especially in the thoroughness and breadth of its construction. It is nearer to the school of Dickens, Thackeray and De Morgan than to that of D. H. Lawrence, but it has a curiously definite individuality of its own that forbids too easy a classification. The author—Geoffrey Dennis is a new name, this is a first novel, and we are definitely told that he is a man, not a woman masquerading with a pen name, although the whole subject of the book is an analysis of the inner life of a girl—has some literary kinship to De Morgan, especially in his superbly good treatment of the ghostly, the supernormal, even the supernatural element. But he has not De Morgan's geniality or comprehensiveness. After all, the dominant note in the book is that of mysticism, but it is a mysticism that never is tenuous or unreal, for to the mystic there is as much solid reality to his vision as to the most brutally commonplace actuality.

The story is told in the first person. From the very outset we are in the heroine's inmost confidence—a confidence that is more convincingly, genuinely, self-expository than the diary of a Marie Bashkirtseff. It is the record of a soul stripped bare, and up to the final scene it is an almost unrelieved soul tragedy. In one sense it is a painful book, a too pitiful narrative, but it always remains a brave affair, and there is not a trace of the false pathos of a weeping Dickens in the harrowing scenes of childhood. There is rather something of the savage directness of Mrs. Voynich's method, but it is a more subtle performance than that of any of its predecessors in a similar field.

The construction is very intricate in its superficial detail, and the plot as a whole defies any brief condensation. But the thing may be boiled down to a summary, to the general statement that it deals with the various successive stages of development of the child Mary Lee from a harsh, unlovely, crabbedly religious environment into a sort of spiritual emancipation and ultimate happiness. The scene is laid for the most part in Devonshire, at Tawborough and Torribridge, with an excursion into France. It begins in 1848 and ends about 1870, and is given in the form of her reminiscences written down when she has reached 50 and has thus gained a proper perspective.

More than three-quarters of the tale is devoted to the life among the Plymouth brethren of the '50s in Devonshire. Mary is the daughter of a middle class woman who has, most unhappily, married a scion of the aristocracy, a cousin, in fact, of the local magnate, Lord Tawborough, in whose family she had been a governess. The husband is an inhuman monster, from whom she is at last obliged to flee. She dies at the birth of the Mary of the story, leaving the child to the care of her grandmother and great-aunt, Hannah Lee and Jael Vickary. These two old women and Mary's uncle, Simeon Greeber, are grotesques; so, too, are the many characters among the Plymouth brethren, who act as a sort of Greek chorus. But they are never grotesques in the Dickens sense of being merely grotesque and grimly humorous. They are hideous realities, and one feels creepily that they are not exaggerated. Aunt Jael and Simeon are utterly vicious, wicked even in their religiosity, but the grandmother, Hannah, is a true saint. She remains, none the less, a holy monstrosity. Aunt Jael, Mary tells us, was "a healthy, cruel, humanly bad old woman, a mere wild beast in comparison to the Greeber reptile," i. e., her uncle Simeon. She is, indeed, one of the most unmitigatedly horrible characters ever portrayed in modern fiction, and the most horrible thing about her is that one feels the unvarnished truth of the picture. Hannah is unselfish, but exclusively preoccupied with Otherworldiness. She, too, believes that an unsparing use of the rod is necessary, and the child is savagely beaten from her babyhood until she is a young woman. During her brief stay with Simeon he carries this brutality to a point that nearly finishes her.

Naturally in such a life an imaginative, intelligent child is driven in upon herself, and soon begins to see visions and dream dreams. She evolves a curious dual personality, and she finally reaches a point where she is able to sense the apparition of her mother almost as a tangible reality. Mary herself tells us that her diary of this time was "morbid, precocious, shrewd, petty, priggish and comically, pitifully sincere. Religion looms large." She is kept isolated from other children and is mentally starved. At a very early age she becomes obsessed with the idea of the horror of eternity, the feeling that there can be no release, not ever, but that she must go on and on without end. Obviously she is not far from out and out insanity, and at one point she realizes it and prays that God may keep her from going mad. It is a ghastly record.

The one redeeming bright spot comes with the other child, Robbie, a boy of her own age—about 11—who is kind to her and of whom she naturally makes an idol. They are torn apart after a brief meeting, but agree to meet "in the spirit" on each Christmas night thereafter. But the reader must be left to find out how this works. It is a tear starting thing.

Mary is at last rescued by young Lord Tawborough, who sends her to France as a governess-companion to a noble family. Here she gains a little releasing worldliness and completes her education, and after a series of adventures comes home and eventually marries Lord Tawborough. But there is no cheap conventionality in the mechanism of it.

The thing is beautifully done. Much of the detail is revolting, and it is something of a relief to realize, when one lays it aside, that it deals with an era that is to-day of the remote past. Yet it is also well to remember it is a past that may come alive again, as the spirit of ultra-Puritanism, of cruelty and ascetic savagery is still a part of the makeup of humanity, though no longer dominant anywhere to-day as it was in Devonshire in 1860. It is, perhaps, just as well that not all current literature should be made up of pleasant pretense. This book has lasting values.

GEORGE WOOD.

THE BREATH OF SCANDAL—By Edwin Balmer. Little, Brown & Co.

PROF. SHUSTER has neatly remarked that the modern novel, "be-spectacled and sitting with the elders, would talk philosophy," and that its aim is "nothing if not social." Mr. Balmer is not talking rarefied philosophy, in any narrow sense, in this very vigorous book, but he is dealing, competently and subtly, with no less a thing than the changing philosophy of life and conduct as the rising generation is working it out for itself in America. The book is highly "social" in its aim. It never degenerates into preaching or forgets that it is, primarily, a story, but Mr. Balmer is taking himself and his audience very seriously. It is an earnest book, one senses deeply moved feeling behind it, and it is, by consequence itself a moving book. It is not only an absorbingly interesting tale but one that is full of solid food for reflection. One might almost claim that there is, implicit in its theme, a possible antidote for much of the disintegrating, poisonous mongrelization and confusion of thought that is rapidly making American society degenerate.

Mr. Balmer's theme has two threads, one a minor affair that is woven in as a part of the whole pattern, though the other is dominant. The chief theme may be stated, roughly, as the weakening of old ideals of marriage and of family life, the effect upon the children of open disagreement between father and mother, divorce, and the gradual growth of a social recognition of the fact that very many husbands and fathers are living an extra-marital existence, while keeping up appearances at home. One of the young men in the story, Gregg Mowbry, an easy-going but really fine character, reflects, when confronted with the fact that Charles Hale, the father of Marjorie, is "leading a double life," that heretofore he had regarded that sort of thing as more or less normal and even insignificant, but that when he meets it concretely he does not like it, especially since it is going to hurt Marjorie, whom he loves.

He observed as a simple, obvious fact that the easy, irresponsible way of living . . . was becoming more and more popular; the old-fashioned home with sober duties and ideals was amazingly less so. If he thought at all of the transition stage, he had supposed it to be easy enough and natural—merely a matter of choice for any individual. . . . But here . . . suddenly he revolted in savage aversion to these great indulgent buildings in such opposition to Marjorie's home and to his own, where he had been happy as a boy.

Marjorie has always idolized her handsome, powerful and highly successful father, until he is shot by the ex-husband of his mistress, and by a set of accidents Marjorie is enlightened. She combines with Gregg and with Bill Whittaker, her fiance, to help them cover the accident to avoid the "breath of scandal," but she is almost mortally hurt herself with the destruction of her idol. And she is puzzled; life, it appears, is not so simple as she had supposed. And she determines to find out "the truth" for herself. This involves a quarrel with her lover, Bill, who is a type of the ultra-simple minded youth of a very old-fashioned order. In fact Bill is simply put into the story to represent something, and as such a typification he is somewhat overdone—not quite wooden, but far less alive than the others. He was capable of "separating people," Marjorie tells him, "as the Sunday school cards used to show God doing, into a flock of sheep and a flock of goats . . . But that arrangement is too easy for this, Billy: it won't work with me."

So she goes off to experiment with life for herself, earning her own living, and is thrown among the vast mass of the foreign born and "new" Americans who make up the bulk of the Chicago where the whole story is staged. And that brings in the subsidiary thread of the story: the overthrow of the old stock by these newcomers. "They're taking over Chicago from you," says the young Hebrew-American lawyer who has been called in to help, "as we are taking over New York from you and the run-down Dutch. The Anglo-Saxon stock in America that sticks to its stock is almost through. It's going down and going under, or it's gone up and—diminishes."

These two threads are very skillfully worked together in an intricate plot, a plot full of finely dramatic situations, orderly and inevitable in its working out. He manages to bring it to a hopeful conclusion with the final romance of Gregg and Marjorie, who decide to begin life together on the old-fashioned basis—with Marjorie's final vision of herself as "a molder and bearer of the future," defiantly asserting that "the Mowbry's wont go down."

Going back to the starting point it is more than implied that the failure of Charles Hale to hold his home together, and his wandering after strange goddesses, is, after all, chiefly due to his wife's failure either to understand him, or to live up to her fair share of the compact of the old ideal of marriage. Charles is not exonerated, but he is explained. The whole analysis is one that might be commended to intelligent American women for soul-searching study.

The book has many fine qualities and strikingly good incidental passages, in addition to the breadth and depth of its main theme. It will hold the attention of any reader, as narrative. But it is of chief value as one of the very best studies thus far produced of the unstable conditions of modern marriage and of its far-reaching effects upon society as a whole.

HENRY WALKER.

AT THE EARTH'S CORE. By Edgar Rice Burroughs. Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co.

"AT the Earth's Core" is the story of David Innes and his subterranean adventures. Innes's friend, Perry, an old inventor, constructs a subterranean prospector. Innes and Perry set out on the prospector's trial trip, the machine gets away from them and burrows, with them inside, far toward the earth's center. Almost dead after a frightful journey, Innes and Perry eventually are disgorged in the country of Pellucidar, inside the earth, where the sun never sets.

Here everything is on the scale of prehistoric ages. Fearsome, horrible animals and reptiles abound. Man is a primitive creature fighting for his existence. The ruling power in Pellucidar is the race of Mahars, whom Perry identifies as the "ramphorhynchi of the Middle Oilitic" on a far larger scale than had ever been identified.

Against this prehistoric background, which Mr. Burroughs recreates with compelling vividness, "At the Earth's Core" unfolds a thrilling, rapid fire adventure story. Innes and Perry attempt to escape from the horrible Mahars, and in their adventures is depicted an exciting battle of modern man, stripped of modern accessories, battling for his very existence against prehistoric beasts, men and conditions. Innes, says of one of his encounters:

> As I turned romance, adventures and discovery in the abstract took wing before the terrible embodiment of all three in concrete form that I beheld advancing upon me.
>
> A huge, slimy amphibian it was, with toadlike body and the mighty jaws of an alligator. Its immense carcass must have weighed tons, and yet it moved swiftly and silently toward me. Upon one hand was the bluff that ran from the canon to the sea, on the other the fearsome swamp from which the creature had sneaked upon me; behind lay the mighty untracked sea and before me in the center of the narrow way that led to safety stood this huge mountain of terrible and menacing flesh.
>
> A single glance at the thing was sufficient to assure me that I was facing one of those long extinct, prehistoric creatures whose fossilized remains are found within the outer crust as far back as the Triassic formation, a gigantic labyrinthedon. And there I was, unarmed and, with the exception of a loin cloth, as naked as I had come into the world. I could imagine how my first ancestor felt that distant, prehistoric morn that he encountered for the first time the terrifying progenitor of the thing that had me cornered now beside the restless, mysterious sea.

Throughout "At the Earth's Core" runs the thread of the romance between David Innes and Dian the Beautiful, a girl from one of the Pellucidarian tribes which has emerged from the slavery of the Mahars and is making good its independence in primitive man's fight against his oppressors. After enduring many prehistoric perils, David saves Dian from her unwelcome caveman suitor, Jubal the Ugly One, by killing Jubal in a smashing hand to hand battle, in which modern scientific boxing outdoes caveman strength. And David claims Dian as his own.

David and Perry instruct Dian's tribe and their allies in the use of the bow and arrow—hitherto unknown among the people of Pellucidar—and in other warlike weapons. The dread Mahars get wind of this and, with their subject races, advance to do battle with David and his men. How the Mahars are worsted in the conflict, how David returns to earth for supplies for Pellucidar, the machinations of Hooja the Sly One against David and Dian, and the mystery of David's final disappearance from this earth, complete this high powered, thrilling tale of imaginative adventure and romance.

Mr. Burroughs writes simply and forcefully. His hero, David Innes, always retains a semblance of his present day personality in his prehistoric surroundings, which creates an atmosphere of reality for the reader of the highly imaginative pages of "At the Earth's Core." The scene at the Mahar temple is rather gruesome, but on the whole "At the Earth's Core" will appeal strongly to Mr. Burroughs's many readers.

JOHN L. B. WILLIAMS.

FOR RICHER, FOR POORER—By Harold H. Armstrong. Alfred A. Knopf.

MR. ARMSTRONG will be recognized by many readers as the author of "Zell," which was issued, to successful results, under the pseudonym of "Henry G. Aikman." Its success now leads him to put forth his future books under his own name, and it is also announced that he has definitely abandoned the practice of law for literature. If he can keep on turning out as good work as this he is quite justified and need not seek the modest screen of using an alias. This novel is on somewhat old fashioned lines—and therefore the more welcome, as

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